

# ACTIVITY 3.2 Charles Perkins and the 'Freedom Ride' of 1965

## AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM HISTORICAL SKILLS

- ▶ Process and synthesise information from a range of sources for use as evidence in an historical argument
- ▶ Identify and analyse the perspectives of people from the past
- ▶ Select and use a range of communication forms (oral, graphic, written) and digital technologies

Charles Perkins was the first Aboriginal Australian to gain a university degree. He spent most of his life working as an activist for Aboriginal rights.

Inspired by the example of Dr Martin Luther King, who had led the movement in the United States to gain equality for black people, Perkins and some of his fellow students from university organised the 1965 'Freedom Ride' protest. Perkins, accompanied by other Aboriginal activists as well as non-Aboriginal students, travelled in a hired bus through the country towns of New South Wales to highlight the discrimination that existed in rural Australia.

Many of these towns had made certain parts of the town 'black' in order to keep Aboriginal and white people separated. Often, Aboriginals were not allowed to share the same areas in pubs, theatres, cafes, swimming pools or hospitals with non-Aboriginal people. They were frequently refused service in shops and refused drinks in hotels. The 'Freedom Riders', as they were known, held protest demonstrations in front of RSL clubs and swimming pools that restricted the entry of Aboriginal people. They not only challenged the discrimination, but made sure that reports of their demonstrations, as well as local townspeople's hostile responses, were available for news broadcasts on radio and television. Throughout their journey, they encountered mobs that punched them, spat on them and threw rubbish at them.

The Freedom Ride was important because:

- It captured the attention of the media. The issue of injustice to Aboriginal people was brought to the notice of all Australians.
- Many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians were inspired to become activists for Aboriginal rights.
- Many people believe that the 1967 referendum on whether Aboriginals should be counted as Australian citizens was successful because of the Freedom Ride two years earlier.

White women jeered and spat at girl freedom riders today as racial violence broke out for the first time at Moree. The students were pushed and carried from the front door of the Moree baths while an angry crowd of 500 booed and catcalled. A fist fight broke out between a local white woman and an Aboriginal woman but was quickly stopped by police ... The trouble erupted when 27 young men and women from Sydney University tried to escort six Aboriginal children into the baths. The children were barred by the mayor, Ald. William Lloyd, and the baths manager, Mr Don Ford.

**Source 1** Extract from news report in the *Daily Mirror*, Sydney, 2 February 1965



**Source 2** Members of the 1965 Freedom Ride protest outside McElhone Memorial Pool in Kempsey, NSW, 25 February 1965.

- 1 Explain how the US civil rights movement influenced Charles Perkins and the other Australian Freedom Riders.

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- 2 Outline the various forms of discrimination Indigenous Australians faced in the towns visited by Charles Perkins and the Freedom Riders.

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What might have been some of the difficulties and challenges faced by the students during their Freedom Ride?

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Explain how the Freedom Ride may have contributed to success for Aboriginal rights in the referendum two years later.

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Using the text and sources included in this activity, write a diary entry from the perspective of one of the students on the Freedom Ride of 1965. Make sure you describe:

- Your motivation for joining the Freedom Riders
- What you hoped the Freedom Ride might achieve
- Some of your key experiences, for example in the Moree baths.



**Source 3** This photograph of Charles Perkins swimming with Aboriginal children in Moree pool appeared in *The Australian* on 19 February 1965. The original caption read 'Mr Charles Perkins, the part Aboriginal student leader, frolics with children in the swimming pool he helped desegregate'.